

CHIP boost must beat a veto

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In the past decade the federal program to provide health insurance to children from low-income families that don't qualify for Medicaid - it's known as CHIP locally but is called SCHIP (for State Children's Health Insurance Program) on the federal level - has drastically reduced the number of American children missing out on health care.

Now, Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., and Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, are proposing a compromise plan to more than double the program from about \$25 billion to \$60 billion over five years. The money would come from increased tobacco taxes, and would allow the addition of an estimated 3.3 million low-income, uninsured children to the rolls. That's a third of the approximately 9 million children still without health insurance.

President Bush is promising to veto the increase as being too large. In the White House, the fact that the expanded CHIP program might actually shift some families from private to public insurance is too horrible to contemplate.

Meanwhile, over in the House of Representatives, Democrats are saying they'll fight to raise the increase to a total of \$75 billion, the original plan before the Senate compromise.

Given the stronger Democratic control of the House, that could happen. But it might not be a good idea, another example of perfection being the enemy of the possible.

Faced with the threat of a veto, Congress needs to agree on a version of CHIP reauthorization and expansion that keeps enough Republicans on board to make it veto-proof. We have no idea just what that bill would look like, but the current Children's Health Insurance Program expires on Sept. 30. There really isn't a lot of time to fool around.